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ABSTRACT

To meet the needs of adult students in higher education, colleges and universities must give attention to the planning implications of enrolling large numbers of adults. Institutions ready to accept the challenge of the adult student must reevaluate program offerings, course scheduling, special degree programs, changes in methods of instruction, student evaluation, student services, curricular organization and delivery, and physical plant considerations. (MJM)

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PLANNING FOR ADULT STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Until recently most of the students on college and university campuses were between age 18 and 22. A few veterans and graduate students could be found who were as old as thirty, but anyone over forty was either on the faculty or a visiting parent.[1] Although age-segregation is still characteristic of many campuses, the notion that higher education is primarily for the young has begun to change, and adult students are coming, or returning, to college in increasing numbers.

There are several reasons for this change. For one thing, demographic charts show a levelling off of the size of the 18-22 year old age group. Colleges and universities are now looking to the large population of adults as a potential source of continued enrollment growth. A second reason is the increased social acceptability and approval of adults as students. The Carnegie Commission on Non-Traditional Study, and other influential groups have given encouragement to those institutions that would open their programs to adults and to those individuals of middle years or beyond who would venture into classrooms once exclusively filled by nubile adolescents. Thirdly, there is an increasing need among older students to attend college. Many come because they want to finish a degree program started years before

[1] Exceptions to this generalization have included a few universities located in the downtown areas of large cities that have had adult enrollments for many years.

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but interrupted for financial, social or sometimes psychological reasons. Other adults feel blocked in their career aspirations without a college degree, or seek retraining in a new profession. Still others see college courses as a creative and fulfilling way to make use of increased leisure time: perhaps to realize a long-held ambition of reading Proust or Plato, perhaps to "keep up with the kids" who have also entered college, or perhaps, to learn a specific skill or receive certification in some area.

For these and other reasons adults are finding their way into colleges and universities in larger numbers, and--given adequate institutional encouragement--their numbers are likely to continue to increase. Opportunity for higher education is not only being extended to minority groups and others who have previously been excluded, it is also being extended chronologically to encompass life-long learning. Social forecasters are predicting an acceleration of this trend in the decades ahead. College and university planners, therefore, have begun to give attention to the planning implications of enrolling large numbers of adults.

There are many questions which must be answered by the institution that seeks to attract and welcome adult learners. One such question is, which programs adult students will enter. An institution must decide whether to open all of its regular or traditional programs to adult students or whether to limit the enrollment of older students to "continuing education" activities. This decision involves more than merely deciding whether to permit older students to matriculate in credit-bearing

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programs. It also involves the question of the part-time student. Since most adults have multiple responsibilities--families, jobs, homes--most are not able to enroll full-time, and many are able to take courses only in the evenings or on weekends. The decision to welcome adult students involves a commitment to scheduling courses in the various disciplines in such a way that a student attending part-time can earn a degree by taking courses at times convenient to him or her, rather than from 9 to 11 on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings. If an institution does schedule late-afternoon, evening and weekend courses, are they part of the regular curriculum taught by the regular faculty, or are they taught by part-time faculty or contained in a separate "evening division" (often a euphemism for "non-credit" or "second-rate")?

In addition to opening its regular programs to adult students or as an alternative, a college or university may wish to organize a separate degree program especially for adults. Such adult degree programs have been started at Roosevelt University, Oklahoma University and elsewhere. Many of these programs have been successful in developing special curricular experiences for adult learners. One ingredient common to the best of these programs is an introductory or transitional experience to facilitate the re-entry of the older student into the academic world which he or she may have left ten or more years ago.

Another element of successful adult degree programs, as well as of those traditional programs that have opened their doors to adults, is the recognition that many adults have information, skills, and understanding

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not reflected as credit on an academic transcript. Adults, even more than other students, must be given an opportunity to demonstrate their learning and competencies however acquired. To require a particular course as a prerequisite to some other course, whether or not the individual knows the subject-matter, simply because it does not appear on a transcript of credit, is an archaic notion which may, perhaps, be imposed on younger students but is unacceptable in the education of adults.

A decision to welcome adult students must have full faculty concurrence, because they will be required to make changes in their traditional method of instruction. Large, impersonal lecture sections should give way to smaller discussion sections where the greater experience and insight of the adult student may be shared with classmates.

New time-frames should be experimented with in teaching adult students. The semester-long course which meets three hours a week for fifteen or sixteen weeks may be less appropriate to adult needs than a course organized as a conference or institute: all day for three or four days. This format is familiar for professional and business meetings; why not for academic courses in some disciplines? In any event, the needs of students should prevail over the accepted customs and inherited preferences of academe.

Many adults having once dropped out of college will want to return after a period of time, often with greater maturity reflected by new interests, new motivation, new abilities, and a more realistic understanding

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of their own strengths and weaknesses. Some of these students may have acquired poor academic records from their first attempt at higher education, fresh out of high school, many years before. How should a university evaluate the record of such a student? Should an adult student be prevented from matriculating because of poor grades received long before? Should he or she be required to maintain a grade-point average high enough to off-set earlier grades earned at that institution or elsewhere? One university which serves a large number of adults has established the policy of "wiping the slate clean" for any adult student who has been away from the university for five or more years after having been placed on academic probation or having been dropped for poor scholarship. It has found that students admitted or reinstated under this policy have a good probability for success.

Adult students are also in need of student services, so new arrangements for curricular organization and delivery must be accompanied by extended hours in the student services offices. The adult who takes courses only in the evening and arrives on campus at 6:00 or 7:00 p. m. should be able to speak with someone in the Registrar's Office, the Counseling Office, or in the Office of Veterans' Affairs. Similarly, the institution may wish to maintain Saturday or week-end office-hours to make certain services more accessible to adult students at these times. Moreover, the campus switchboard must be open to receive calls and take messages from adults who are not able to phone in during the working day. The availability of student services at convenient hours often makes the difference between a successful adult program and one that is perceived as merely a grudging

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acceptance of more enrollments.

One of the services available to younger students sometimes denied adults is the existence of academic and social organizations and clubs reflecting various interest groups and concerns. These co-curricular activities are often important for supplemental learning, for social contacts, and for developing a feeling of involvement in campus life. Sometimes these activities start spontaneously. Where this has not happened, however, and where there is an apparent need, the institution may wish to help foster the development of an "adult students' league" or similar organization which might have as one of its functions representing the needs, interests, and concerns of older students to the faculty and administration.

At the same time that the institution plans to make its curriculum and student services conveniently available to adults, it should also evaluate the appropriateness for adults of its various administrative rules and procedures. Too often the regulations for registration, adding or dropping a course, applying for graduation, and the like, which were developed for younger students, are demeaning for adults. Parietal rules have given-way on most campuses, but red-tape sticks tight.

Most of what has been mentioned relates to the curricular and student service needs of adult students which must be considered by academic planners. However, there are physical plant considerations which must also be evaluated in planning for adult students. Are the buildings or classrooms accessible in the evenings, or are they vacated and locked at 5:00? One adult degree program has had to cope with the major incon-

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venience of being assigned to a part of the campus which was traditionally closed at night. If such assignments cannot be avoided, then new security and traffic regulations may have to be adopted to permit evening access.

Are the facilities themselves conducive to adult learners? Chairs should be comfortable, room arrangements flexible, surroundings attractive, and directions well marked. Some campuses and academic buildings are so labyrinthine or so poorly signed that a full-time student requires months or years to navigate the campus and faculty may lose their way to the bookstore or handball court. How frustrating for the adult who must chart his way in such murky waters.

Finally, the adult student must view the campus as a hospitable place where his or her needs have been considered. Is there a place for adults to congregate and meet their classmates before or between classes where the reverberations of acid-rock and the tumult of teenagers does not grey the hair of those unaccustomed to youthful frenzy or embarrassed by public passion? Lounges, reading rooms, and cafeterias in which adults will feel comfortable must be available.

As college and university planners we must give at least as much attention to meeting the special needs of adult students as we did to planning for the other major developments which occurred on our campuses: the influx of G.I.'s, the enrollment growth of the '60s, the opening of our campuses to their communities, changes in the curriculum, the demise of in loco parentis regulations, and others. Universal access to higher educa-

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tion--by persons of all ages--will be the next major development to influence our institutions. The enrollment of adults in large numbers is already taking place on many campuses. It is up to us to see that our institutions are ready to accept this challenge and accommodate the needs of adult learners.

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October, 1973

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